

Improving Elementary School Students' Motivation and Achievement in Learning English Through Educational Competition Activities

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Abstract

In many elementary schools, English learning still faces various challenges, such as low student motivation, limited confidence in using English, and the dominance of teacher-centered instructional practices. These conditions often result in minimal student participation and unsatisfactory learning outcomes. This community service program aimed to improve elementary school students' motivation and learning achievement in English through educational competition activities. The program was conducted in Elementary School 3 Kranggan by employing a participatory approach by actively involving 4th grade students in a series of educational competitions, including vocabulary contests, spelling competitions, and simple speaking activities. The implementation stages consisted of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The results showed a significant improvement in elementary school students' motivation, as reflected in increased enthusiasm, active participation, and greater confidence in using English. These findings indicate that educational competition activities can serve as an effective, enjoyable, and student-centered strategy to enhance motivation and learning achievement in English among elementary school students.

Keywords: educational competition, elementary school students, English learning, learning achievement, learning motivation

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INTRODUCTION

English is widely recognized as an international language that plays an essential role in global communication, education, science, and technology. In the context of education, English proficiency is increasingly viewed as a fundamental skill that supports students' academic development and future opportunities. In many countries, including non-English-speaking contexts, English has been introduced at the elementary school level to prepare students for higher levels of education and to equip them with basic communication skills needed in a globalized world. Early exposure to English enables young learners to acquire pronunciation, vocabulary, and simple communicative competence more naturally and effectively (Harmer,

2007; Cameron, 2001).

Despite its importance, English learning at the elementary school level continues to face various challenges. Many students perceive English as a difficult and intimidating subject, which often results in low learning motivation and limited participation in classroom activities. Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety when speaking in front of peers, and low self-confidence frequently hinder students from using English actively. In addition, students' limited vocabulary mastery and lack of meaningful exposure to English outside the classroom further contribute to learning difficulties.

Instructional factors also play a significant role in shaping students' motivation and learning outcomes. Teacher-centered instructional practices, which emphasize memorization, repetition, and textbook-based learning, may reduce students' opportunities to actively use English in meaningful contexts (Yamin, 2017). Such approaches often fail to address the characteristics of young learners, who generally learn more effectively through interactive, enjoyable, and experiential activities. As a result, students may lose interest in learning English and demonstrate passive behavior during lessons (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Learning motivation is a crucial factor that influences students' engagement and success in the learning process (Uno, 2016); Sardiman, 2018). Motivation determines the extent to which students are willing to participate, persist, and invest effort in learning activities. Highly motivated students tend to show curiosity, enthusiasm, and resilience when facing learning challenges, which positively affects their learning achievement. Conversely, students with low motivation are more likely to avoid learning tasks and achieve lower academic outcomes.

To overcome these challenges, educators and community service practitioners are encouraged to implement innovative and student-centered learning strategies that align with the characteristics of young learners (Yamin, 2017). One such strategy is the use of educational competitions in English learning. Competition-based learning can create a fun, challenging, and stimulating learning environment that encourages students to participate actively and use the target language more confidently (Hamalik, 2015; Slattery & Willis, 2001). Competitive activities provide clear goals, immediate feedback, and rewards, which can enhance students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

In the context of community service, educational competition activities can also serve as an effective means to support schools in improving the quality of English learning. By integrating educational competitions into learning activities, students are given opportunities to practice English in a supportive and enjoyable atmosphere. Based on these considerations, this community service program implemented educational English competition activities as an alternative strategy to improve elementary school students' motivation and achievement in learning English.

METHOD

This community service activity employed a participatory method that emphasized active student involvement throughout the program. The participatory

approach was selected to ensure that students were not only recipients of instruction but also active participants in the learning process (Brown, 2017). The participants of this program were 30 elementary school students of 4th grade who were learning English as a foreign language in Elementary School 3 Kranggan, Ngajum, Malang.

The program was designed in the form of educational English competitions tailored to students' age, interests, and proficiency levels. The competition activities focused on basic English skills, including vocabulary, spelling, and simple speaking, which are fundamental components of English learning for young learners. These skills were selected because they form the foundation for further language development and are appropriate for elementary school students. Thus, the questions in the competition activities were adjusted to the students' levels so that the vocabularies used were also simple and familiar to the students of Elementary school.

The implementation of the program consisted of three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning stage, the service team conducted initial observations and informal discussions with teachers to identify students' motivation levels, learning difficulties, and English proficiency. Based on this information, competition materials, assessment criteria, and activity schedules were prepared.



Figure 1. The team conducted observation and informal discussion with the teachers

The implementation stage involved conducting the educational competitions in a supportive and enjoyable learning atmosphere. Students participated individually or in small groups in vocabulary competitions, spelling contests, and simple speaking activities such as self-introductions and short dialogues. Facilitators provided clear instructions, guidance, encouragement, and positive reinforcement to maintain students' motivation and confidence.

The evaluation stage was carried out through observation of students' participation, enthusiasm, and interaction during the activities. In addition, the results of the competitions were analyzed to identify improvements in students' vocabulary mastery and speaking ability. Reflections from facilitators and feedback from students were also used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this community service program indicate that educational competition activities had a positive and meaningful impact on the students' motivation to learn English. During the implementation of the competitions, the students demonstrated higher levels of enthusiasm, attention, and active participation compared to regular classroom learning activities. Many students appeared more engaged, responded more quickly to instructions, and showed excitement when participating in vocabulary, spelling, and speaking competitions.



Figure 2. The active participations of the students during the competitions

The competitive elements embedded in the activities, such as clear rules, achievable challenges, time limits, and rewards, played an important role in increasing students' motivation. These elements encouraged students to focus on tasks, cooperate with peers, and strive to perform better, as well-designed competition can enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in learning contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Sardiman, 2018). In addition, the use of games and group-based competitions fostered positive social interaction among students, which further enhanced their engagement and enjoyment in learning English. Previous studies have shown that interactive and collaborative activities significantly improve young learners' engagement and motivation in foreign language classrooms (Butler, 2014; Slattery & Willis, 2001).

In terms of learning achievement, the results showed noticeable improvements in students' vocabulary mastery and basic speaking skills. Vocabulary competitions enabled students to recognize and recall new words more effectively, supporting research findings that repeated exposure and meaningful practice are key factors in vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2007). Spelling competitions helped students become more familiar with English word forms and pronunciation patterns, which contributes to the development of early literacy and phonological awareness in EFL learners (Ehri, 2005; Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, simple speaking competitions provided meaningful opportunities for students to practice pronunciation and basic communication in real contexts. Communicative activities

such as these are proven to improve learners' speaking ability and confidence, particularly at the elementary level (Brown, 2017; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Sato & Ballinger, 2012). These activities supported students in developing foundational English skills that are essential for further language learning.

One notable finding was the improvement in students' confidence in using English. Several students who were previously reluctant or hesitant to speak English became more willing to participate in simple speaking activities, such as self-introductions and short dialogues. The supportive and non-threatening atmosphere created through competition activities helped reduce students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes. This finding supports motivation theories which suggest that enjoyable and rewarding learning experiences can enhance students' willingness to take risks in language learning (Uno, 2016; Sardiman, 2018).



Figure 3. The students performed in the simple speaking competition

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that language learning is more effective when learners are actively involved in communicative and interactive activities (Brown, 2017; Harmer, 2007). Educational competition activities align with the principles of teaching English to young learners, which emphasize fun, repetition, interaction, and meaningful use of language. Therefore, the implementation of educational competition activities not only enhanced students' motivation but also contributed to improved English learning achievement among elementary school students.

The findings of this program indicate that educational competitions positively influenced students' learning motivation, as reflected in their enthusiasm, active participation, and willingness to use English during the activities. Increased motivation played a significant role in enhancing students' learning achievement, especially in vocabulary mastery and basic speaking skills. This result supports previous studies which emphasize that motivation is a key determinant of successful learning outcomes and that enjoyable learning experiences can strengthen students'

engagement and persistence in learning (Uno, 2016; Sardiman, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of educational competitions aligns with the principles of teaching English to young learners, which highlight the importance of interaction, repetition, meaningful language use, and enjoyment in the learning process. By integrating games and competitive elements, students were able to practice English in authentic and meaningful contexts, thereby improving both their cognitive and affective learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with the views of Harmer (2007) and Cameron (2001), who argue that young learners benefit from interactive and experience-based language learning activities.

From a community service perspective, this program demonstrates that simple and well-designed educational interventions can make a meaningful contribution to improving the quality of English learning in elementary schools. Educational competition activities are relatively easy to implement, do not require complex resources, and can be adapted to different learning contexts and student abilities. Therefore, such activities can serve as a practical and sustainable alternative strategy for teachers and schools in supporting English learning at the elementary school level (Brown, 2017; Slattery & Willis, 2001).



Figure 4. The champions were given prizes after the competitions finished

To support the qualitative findings, a simple questionnaire was distributed to participants at the end of the program. The questionnaire was designed using simple and clear statements appropriate for elementary school students. It aimed to capture students' perceptions of the learning activities, their enjoyment, and their motivation to learn English after participating in the competitions.

Table 1. Students' Responses to the Educational Competition Activities

No	Questionnaire Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1	I enjoy learning English through competitions.	10	15	5	0
2	The competition activities make English fun.	16	9	5	0

No	Questionnaire Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
3	I am more confident to use English after joining the competitions.	11	14	5	0
4	The games and competitions help me learn new English words.	15	5	10	0
5	I want to learn English using competitions again in the future.	13	9	8	0

Source: Processed by Author, 2026

The questionnaire results indicate that most students responded positively to the implementation of educational competition activities. A high percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed that the competitions made learning English enjoyable and helped them improve their confidence and vocabulary mastery. These results further confirm that competition-based learning can enhance students' motivation and positive attitudes toward English learning.

CONCLUSION

The results of this community service program indicate that educational competition activities are effective in improving elementary school students' motivation and achievement in learning English. The competitions created a fun, engaging, and supportive learning environment that encouraged active participation and increased students' confidence in using English. Educational competitions can be considered a practical and student-centered alternative strategy for English learning at the elementary school level. Thus, with proper planning and support, these activities can be integrated into regular learning programs and community service initiatives to promote more effective, enjoyable, and student-centered English learning experiences for elementary school students.

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